

## *Original Paper*

# A Study on English Translation of Numerals in TCM—Taking Li Zhaoguo’s English Translation Version of *Yellow Emperor’s Canon of Medicine* as an Example

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### **Abstract**

*As traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) gradually enters the international perspective, it is facing new opportunities and challenges, so the translation of Chinese medicine culture becomes more important. TCM classics are the principle part of TCM culture. Among them, numerals occupy a large proportion, and at the same time, numerals are an aspect that translators can easily ignore. Therefore, this article discusses the English translation of TCM numerals. Besides, due to the different cultural backgrounds, there are many non-correspondences between Chinese and English numerals. The meaning of quantifiers in English is single, while the meaning of numerals in Chinese medicine is complicated. It requires that translators should pay attention to numeral translation on the process of translation. Yellow Emperor’s Canon of Medicine has been guiding the development of Chinese medicine. This paper, taking Li Zhaoguo’s translation vision as an example, makes an in-depth analysis of the meaning of numerals, studies the translation methods of translators, and compares Li’s vision numeral processing methods, so as to better apply them to the translation practice of TCM culture.*

### **Keywords**

*Traditional Chinese medicine, Numerals, Yellow Emperor’s Canon of Medicine, English translation*

## **1. Introduction**

Traditional Chinese medicine is a treasure of traditional Chinese culture, which shows the infinite charm of Chinese culture. Nowadays, with the improvement of the international status of Chinese medicine, its scientific nature and status are continuously recognized by countries around the world. Therefore, in order to promote the Chinese medicine culture to the whole world and facilitate the

communication and dissemination of it, traditional Chinese medicine translation becomes particularly important. Numerals appearing in TCM is an inevitable part of the English translation process, and TCM classics have been an important carrier of TCM culture from ancient times to the present. The numerals contained in them are worthy of our consideration to pursue the accuracy of translation. In the past, there has been relatively little research in this area, so there is a large gap in this field. *Yellow Emperor's Canon of Medicine* is one of the "four classics" of traditional Chinese medicine. Therefore, this article attempts to explore the English translation of numerals with Li Zhaoguo's translation vision of this book and obtain some translation skills of numerals, so as to provide reference for the English translation of traditional Chinese medicine culture.

## 2. Overview and Significance of Numeral English Translation Studies

### 2.1 Research Situation

The definition of numerals in Cihai, a comprehensive dictionary of eclectic and encyclopedic words in China, refers to words that represent numbers. Use numbers together or add other words to indicate ordinal numbers, fractions, multiples, and approximate numbers, such as first, five percent, three thousand times, and sixteen and seven.

At present, the main research directions of English translation of numerals in China are idioms, proverbs, allusions, and classical literature works. There are relatively few studies on the numerals in Chinese medicine classics, therefore, the numerals' research vacancy is conspicuous. In terms of the poems and proses, the research is relatively rich. The numeral word enters the poem, has the aesthetic feeling and the sense of beauty. Numerals have their meaning characteristics, which create a splendid mood for poetry and a kind of extremely beautiful artistic conception to the poem, create beautiful images, and give people more space for reverie and reflection. Take a line in Liu Zongyuan's *River Snow* for example, "A hundred mountains and no bird, a thousand paths without a footprint", among which "a hundred" and "a thousand" use the exaggerated function of numerals to render the beautiful and desolate conception vividly and incisively. Most of these numbers are translated by free translation and literal translation. In the process of using numbers, in addition to the most basic meaning itself, there are many extended meanings. Therefore, the translation should be carefully considered according to the context and strive for a proper translation.

The study of English translation of numerals in the west is generally related to its religion, philosophy, linguistics, syntax, and fuzzy semantics. The cultural charm and differences reflected in it are worth exploring. There are still many differences between Chinese and English numerals, so it is necessary that the two should be compared to arrive at a suitable translation method to promote cultural exchange and spread.

### 2.2 Significance of Research on Translation of Numerals in TCM

The English translation of traditional Chinese medicine numerals involves a lot of knowledge about Chinese numerals, traditional Chinese medicine classics, traditional Chinese medicine culture, and

traditional Chinese medicine translation. Therefore, there are some references to various aspects.

In terms of Chinese numerals, numerals not only have superficial quantitative meanings, but also carry many deep meanings. In the process of studying traditional Chinese medicine numerals, it is necessary to understand and analyze Chinese numerals. The *Yellow Emperor's Canon of Medicine* is the earliest medical classic in China. It contains a large and representative corpus of numerals, which can be used for reference in the study of numerals in Chinese language or literature.

In terms of the dissemination of Chinese medicine culture, the *Yellow Emperor's Canon of Medicine* was written during the Warring States Period, which contains a large amount of knowledge and culture of Chinese medicine. And now the book still has profound guiding significance for clinical practice. Then the numerals in it reflect the diversification of TCM culture to varying degrees, and the study of numerals has also promoted the understanding and deepening of the ideology and culture of TCM to a certain extent, so as to better promoted the communication of TCM.

In terms of TCM translation strategies, based on the study of English translation of numerals by TCM, the purpose is to come up with good translation methods so that there are basis in translation. Many domestic experts and scholars, as well as translators and enthusiasts of traditional Chinese medicine who have done researches on this aspect, but relatively few translations of traditional Chinese medicine numerals have been provided. This paper provides relevant reference for its development in this direction.

### 3. Value and Representative Significance of Li Ben

Li Zhaoguo, a professor at Shanghai Normal University, is mainly engaged in English teaching and translation research. He has published more than 20 research monographs, more than 30 translated books, and hundreds of research papers, random thoughts, random notes and reading notes. His translation of *The Yellow Emperor's Canon of Medicine Plain Conversation* was the first to translate it from a translator's perspective. Since 1985, Professor Li Zhaoguo has begun to translate the earliest extant medical classics in China, the *Yellow Emperor's Canon of Medicine*. After more than 20 years of hard work, his translation of *The Yellow Emperor's Canon of Medicine* was included in the Chinese-English "Library of Chinese Classics" project organized by the National Press and Publication Administration in 2000. The three volumes of the *Plain Conversation* were published in 2005. A three-volume translation of *Spiritual Pivot* was published in 2008. This is the first complete translation of *The Yellow Emperor's Canon of Medicine* translated by translators in mainland China.

*The Yellow Emperor's Canon of Medicine* enjoys the title of "the ancestor of medical books" and is the first of the four classics of traditional Chinese medicine. It encompasses a wealth of medical theory and clinical practice experience and fully reflects the achievements of ancient Chinese medicine. Both occupy an important position in the history of Chinese medicine and even the history of world medicine. It has made great contributions to the formation of the theory system of traditional Chinese medicine and still guides clinical practice to this day.

Mr. Li Zhaoguo's accomplishments in English translation of traditional Chinese medicine and the status of *The Yellow Emperor's Cannon of Medicine* in medical history make the numerals in this translation extremely conspicuous and representative.

#### 4. Fuzziness of Numerals

##### 4.1 Comparison of Numerals in English and Chinese

Due to the inconsistency of the English and Chinese language backgrounds, there are differences between Chinese and English numerals in terms of frequency of use, word formation structure, and pragmatic meaning. There are a large number of idioms and proverbs in Chinese, and they are widely used. For example, there are a large number of relevant numeral idioms consisting of “一心两用”, “三言两语”, “五湖四海”, “七上八下”, while in English there are only two expressions such as in twos and threes, at sixes and sevens. This shows that Chinese numerals are used more frequently than English, and that Chinese has a stronger ability to form words than English. This shows that there are many vocabulary vacancies in the meaning of numerals in Chinese and English languages, which has caused some problems in translation between English and Chinese. In fact, there is a pragmatic difference in the use of the two languages. In addition to the actual meanings, there are many extended meanings, such as the “四” in the Chinese idiom “四通八达”, the “four” in English also have extended meanings, such as the four hundred (上层社会), and four-letter word (粗话) and so on .

##### 4.2 Fuzziness of TCM Numerals

Language has a high degree of generality, which determines the ambiguity of the language, so this makes the numerals have the fuzziness in certain circumstances. The traditional Chinese medicine language has obvious vague characteristics, especially the traditional Chinese medicine books have a lot of vague language. In this way, we will encounter many problems in the process of understanding Chinese language and translating it accurately.

#### 5. Research Method

Open the electronic version of the *Yellow Emperor's Cannon of Medicine* and use the search function of Microsoft Word 2016 to enter “one”, “two”, “three”, “four”, “five”, “seven”, “eight”, “nine”, “ten”, “hundred”, “thousands” and “ten thousand”, and then check the search results to avoid mistakes and omissions. Then, a comparative analysis of the screening results is carried out, and an relatively effective translation method is obtained.

#### 6. English Translation of Numerals in TCM

##### 6.1 Classification of Numerals

According to the classification methods of numerals by domestic and foreign scholars and the characteristics of Chinese language, especially the language characteristics of TCM language embodied in the *Yellow Emperor's Cannon of Medicine*, Chinese numerals can be classified according to their

forms and meanings.

### 6.1.1 Classification by Form

#### (1) Single Numeral

Example: 余推而论之，以为一纪(《官能第七十三》)。

Translation: What I have learnt is too much to be listed. I have made some inferences and summarize it into a system(Li, 2008).

Implication: 我推究其中的道理，经过归纳整理，已成为一个系统的理论(Liu, 2008).

Single numeral are the most common form of numerals. The “一” here means the meaning means “one”, and a literal translation method is used here.

#### (2) Connecting Numerals

Example: 病胁下满，气逆，二三年不已，是何病(《奇病论篇第四十七》)。

Translation: What is the disease that lasts two or three years with the manifestations of hypochondriac fullness and reserve flow of Qi(Li, 2005)?

Implication: 有人患胁下胀满，气逆，两三年不愈，是什么疾病呢(Liu, 2005) ?

This sentence uses equivalent translation.

#### (3) Numeral Interval

Example: 肾脏主水，受五脏六腑之精而藏之(《金匱真言论篇第四》)。

Translation: The kidney controls water, it receives and stores Jing (Essence) from Five Zang-Organs and the Six Fu-Organs(Li, 2005).

Implication: 肾脏主水，接受五脏六腑之精气并加以贮藏(Liu, 2005).

“五脏六腑” involves the translation of traditional Chinese medicine terms. So far, there are many versions of this term, such as “viscera”, “Five internal organs”, etc. There are even funny translations of “five warehouses, six palaces”. However, Mr. Li Zhaoguo adopted a combination of transliteration, which not only preserved the national language characteristics, but also refined the introduction. And it was slowly accepted by scholars at home and abroad.

### 6.1.2 Classification by Meaning

#### (1) Product

Example: 二七而天癸至，任脉通，太冲脉盛，月事以时下，故有子(《上古天真论篇第一》)。

Translation: At the age of fourteen, Tiangui begins to appear, Renmai (Conception Vessel) and Chongmai (Thoroughfare Vessel) are vigorous in function. Then she begins to have menstruation and is able to conceive a baby(Li, 2005).

Implication: 到了 14 岁，天癸产生，任脉通畅，冲脉旺盛，月经按月来潮，所以能过生育(Liu, 2005).

“二七” here represents the product in ancient Chinese, and is equivalent to “age” in this context. Including the following “三七”，“四七”，and “五七” have been treated similarly, translated into “At the age of...”.

## (2) Accurate Representation of Blur

Example: 水精四布, 五经并行, 合于四时五脏阴阳, 揆度以为常也(《经脉别论篇第二十一》).

Translation: In this way, the Jing (Essence) of water is distributed all through the body and into the five Channels in conformity with the change of the four seasons and the change of Yin and Yang of the Five Zang-Organs(Li, 2005).

Implication: 这样则水精散布全身, 灌输于五脏经脉之中, 符合四时五脏阴阳的变化规律(Liu, 2005).

The numerals here have been converted and here adopted adaptation translation method. The “four” in this article means the whole body, so it is treated as “all through the body”.

## (3) Metasemy

Example: 此乃所谓守一勿失, 万物毕者也(《病传篇第四十二》).

Translation: That means once you have gasped the main principle, it will possible for you to deal with many other different things(Li, 2008).

Implication: 这就是掌握总的原则而不违背, 就能解决各种复杂问题的道理(Liu, 2008).

“一” here uses interpretive translation method to explain its inner meaning, which indicates the general rules.

## 6.2 TCM Numerals Translation Principles

### 6.2.1 Principle of Nationality

The so-called nationality principle refers to respecting the linguistic habits of the target country in translation, and trying to maintain the nationality of fuzzy semantics of quantifiers. Language is the carrier of culture, and TCM language is an important support for TCM culture. TCM language has a clear ambiguity, and the backgrounds of the formation of Chinese and English languages are not the same. Therefore, in the process of English translation, we need to take care of readers in English-speaking countries and interpret or annotate numerals to help the target language readers understand.

Example : 取之膺中外脸, 背三节五脏之傍.....(《五邪第二十》).

Translation: [To treat such a disease, ] Acupoints located on the lateral side of the chest and the Acupoint located lateral to the third thoracic vertebra can be needled(Li, 2008).

Implication: 治疗时可取胸外上部的中府、云门穴, 以及背部第三胸椎旁的肺俞穴(Liu, 2008).

The “三节五脏” here did not adopt the method of equivalent translation, but used the method of interpreting translation to translate into “Acupoint located lateral to the third thoracic vertebra...”, and added “Acupoint” to make the translation more convenient for target language readers to understand.

### 6.2.2 Principle of Popularity

The expression of fuzzy numbers in Chinese and English language has a long-term and regular sentence. They are simple and concise, easy to understand, and can not force the word equivalent of numbers when translating. Instead, we should take the habit as the principle and pay attention to the authentic expression. We try our best to adopt the principle of naturalization in translation and find out

the most appropriate idiom to correspond to. For example, the Chinese translation of “乱七八糟” is “at sixes and sevens”.

### 6.2.3 Principle of Visualization

The so-called visual principle means that when translating, we should go beyond the superficial meaning of the numerals and its meaning should be used to capture the meaning of the image after combining it with other words. According to the national cultural tradition and language expression habits, we should either retain the image, or convert it into the image in the target language, choose the right words to translate.

Example: 肺朝百脉，输精于皮毛(《经脉别论篇第二十一》)。

Translation: The lung is connected with all the vessels and transport Jing(Essence)to the skin and hair(Li, 2005).

Implication: 肺又将其输送到全身经脉之中，把精气输送到皮毛(Liu, 2005).

Here, “百” refers to the meaning of whole body. This numeral is not a simple superficial meaning. It should not be translated into “hundred”, but its deep meaning. Consequently, it can be explained to facilitate the understanding of the target language readers, and it is also more vivid.

## 6.3 Translation Method of Numerals in TCM

### 6.3.1 Literal Translation

Literal translation refers to a translation method or text that maintains both the original content and the original form in the process of translating numerals. This is the most common method of translation. On the basis of understanding the numerals in the original text, as long as it complies with language specifications and relevant expression habits, equivalent translation is generally used. In this way, the national characteristics of TCM culture are retained, and the feelings of translators are also taken into account.

### 6.3.2 Liberal Translation

Free translation refers to translation according to the general meaning of numerals in the context, and does not translate word by word. Free translation is mainly applied in situations where the original and target languages reflect a huge cultural difference. From the perspective of cross-cultural language communication and cultural exchange, free translation emphasizes the relative independence of the target cultural system and the original cultural system. Different nations have different cultural customs. When the content of the original text is in conflict with the expression form of the translation, it is not appropriate to use literal translation. Instead, we need to adapt to it without having to stick to the original meaning and form of the original text.

Example: 圣人通万物也，若日月之光影，音声鼓响.....(《五音五味第六十五》)。

Translation: The sages can understand all the things in the world as clearly as the shine of the sun and the moon, and the sound of the drum being beaten(Li, 2008).

Implication: 圣人之能通晓万事万物，就像日月之有光和影，鼓响之有声音.....(Liu, 2008).

The “万” here means everything, so there is no literal translation when translating, and it is not restricted to the superficial meaning of the number, but is translated as “all”.

### 6.3.3 Adaptation Translation

Adaptation translation is to change the structure of the original sentence, appropriately increase or decrease certain information, and adapt the language expression habits of the target language to facilitate readers' understanding.

Example: 和于阴阳，调于四时(《上古天真论篇一》)。

Translation: ...abiding by [the changes of] Yin and Yang, adapting [themselves] to the changes of seasons...(Li, 2005).

Implication: 能和调于阴阳四时的变化(Liu, 2005).

A “seasons” is used to indicate “四时”, and the numeral “四” is omitted in translation, which is concise and clear, and does not affect the meaning of the original text.

### 6.3.4 Annotation

Due to the many differences between English and Chinese cultures, especially in medical culture, certain cultural words in Chinese medicine have no equivalent in Western medicine at all, so there are many vacancies in word meaning. In this case, Chinese-English translation is often necessarily use annotations to fill the gap. Annotations can usually supplement the semantics and facilitate the understanding of the target speaker.

Example: 肝、心、脾、肺、肾五脏皆为阴，胆、胃、大肠、小肠、膀胱、三焦六腑皆为阳(《金匱真言论篇第四》)。

Translation: So the liver, the heart, the spleen, the lung and the kidney are all Yin, while the gallbladder, the stomach, the large intestine, the small intestine, the bladder and the Sanjiao (Triple-Energizer) are all Yang (Li, 2005).

Implication: 肝、心、脾、肺、肾五脏都属阴，胆、胃、大肠、小肠、膀胱、三焦六腑都属阳(Liu, 2005).

The sentence contains the numerical term “三焦”. And the method of transliteration and annotation is adopted here. It not only retains the characteristics of traditional Chinese medicine, but also explains the interpretation of Sanjiao by this method, which is beneficial to readers' acceptance.

## 7. Conclusion

Traditional Chinese medicine is a treasure of the Chinese nation. Translation has played an incomparable role in the process of Chinese medicine going global. There are many numerals in TCM culture, and mainly in the classics of TCM, which account for a large number of numerals in them. Numerals have both real and imaginary meanings, and there are large differences between Chinese and English numerals, which has caused some difficulties in English translation of numerals. However, in the process of translation, numerals are easily ignored by translators, and related research is relatively few. Therefore, this article takes the *Yellow Emperor's Cannon of Medicine*, one of the four classics of



Chinese medicine, as an object. And then uses the translation vision of Mr. Li Zhaoguo, who is well-known in the field of Chinese medicine, as an example to discuss the classification, principles and methods of numerals in TCM.

This article uses the document search function of Microsoft Word 2016 to filter and analyze the numbers found. On this basis, translators can use literal translation, liberal translation, adaptation translation and annotation when dealing with numerals. In the course of practice, a combination of two or more translation methods can also be adopted together to make the translation of numerals more flexible.

Due to the large length of the *Yellow Emperor's Canon of Medicine* and the large number of numerals, this article only randomly selects a small part for analysis. Besides, the numerals in traditional Chinese medicine have far-reaching significance, it is inevitable that the phenomenon of partiality will appear. In addition, my knowledge of linguistics and medicine is shallow, and I have insufficient practical experience, so I have a lot of lack of understanding of traditional Chinese medicine numerals. This article discusses inadequacies and requires continuous learning.

In addition, I have little knowledge of linguistics and medicine and lack of practical experience, so there are many deficiencies in my understanding of numerals in TCM. This thesis exists many limitations and I should constantly enrich my knowledge. Despite the limitations, it also offers implications to further study.

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